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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions of female, at-risk students, their parents, and personnel at their school. The study was conducted at a comprehensive high school in the greater metropolitan New York area. Educational engagement and school membership were analyzed to see how these factors contribute both to the academic success and full participation of these identified students. Students, staff, and parents were asked their perceptions of the organizational and ecological barriers that influence students at risk of dropping out. In the responses, parents and staff believed that students found someone in the school to care for them. The security guards were seen by the adults to be an important reserve of caring for the at-risk students. Additionally, adults identified the isolates in the at-risk population to be alcoholics and drug addicts. Adults had definite ideas of how their colleagues could better serve the at-risk students--ideas which matched those of the students. Both adults and students described the same verbal and non-verbal non-caring behaviors. It is hoped that this study will identify elements that can be used to build and sustain a caring school community as well as a program for improving self-esteem and caring. (RJM)

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Correspondence in Themes Identified by Students, Parents, and School Support Staff with Regard to the Importance of Various Factors in the Success or Failure of Female At-Risk Students

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Correspondence in Themes Identified by Students, Parents, and School Staff with Regard to the Importance of Various Factors in the Success or Failures of Female At-risk Students

A study was conducted on the perceptions of female at-risk students, their parents, and school personnel regarding educational engagement, together with school membership, and how these factorscontribute to the academic success and full participation of these identified students. The study was conducted in a comprehensive high school in the greater metropolitan New York area. Students, staff, and parents were queried in order to understand their perceptions of the organizational and ecological barriers that contribute to students at risk of dropping out. To accomplish this, the subjects were asked their perceptions, which were recorded and analyzed in order to identify similarities, differences, and themes. It is my hope that as an outcome of this analysis, elements will be identified that, if they are in place, can be used to build and sustain a caring school community, a program for improving self-esteem and caring that has multiple modalities, acts of loving kindness, and produces what Pestalozzi (in Noddings, 1984) described as being a household instead of being a school.

The adult responses were compiled from three different focus groups comprised of mentors, guidance as a department, and parents. There was a high degree of correspondence between students and adults with regard to the various factors that contributed to the success or failure of the at-risk students.

Caring. There was agreement among the adults that the at-risk students responded to different teachers for a variety of reasons. They believed that each child finds someone, a niche, depending on the child's needs. The adults also believed finding the person went across the different cultures. Two administrators, the nurse, and the social worker were more specific in identifying who at-risk students responded to:

- Someone non-judgmental and open. Someone who can hide the shock at what they tell you. Someone who is up front and honest, kids see right through people.
- A person who is strong, assertive, has control over the kids.
- The security guards. No one else impacts on them. The security guards don't impact on their grades, there are no consequences. The security guards are their support figures.

When asked why the security guards have such an impact on the students, the adults responded:

* The informality of the security guards takes away some of the kids' tension. There is genuineness, honesty, caring and warmth about the security guards toward the at-risk students.

* They take the time to talk to and listen to the students.

A response that revealed many layers to the school's problems was:

* They live in the community, are in the student's lounge. Four years ago teachers used to have hall duty, now the guards have that as one of their jobs. The guards are on the same wavelength as the students. The students are not intimidated by them. These people (guards) feel more at ease with the kids. They feel below administration and the teachers. They are at the dances. They are laid back but have self-respect.

When asked who the at-risk students turn to when they have a problem at school, there was a variety of responses. The security guards were believed to be invaluable. The adults said that the guards truly care about the kids, not about money or ego. When visiting the Projects (a low income housing development), we observed the head security guard to be the school representative who followed through on the assistant principal's letter to the parents announcing a school-community meeting.

The adults identified the nurse, social worker, health teacher, Mr. Buddy (fictitious name), and the art and music teachers as caring because the students were able to express themselves, and the students see them as caring. The isolates were seen as not attaching to anyone. They were also described as the group that is into drugs and alcohol. The final group that adults identified were friends:

* They go to their friends first, they mostly conference with their peers. They have the feeling their peers will understand them, mostly because they have lived through it.

The caring behaviors shown by staff were being there, encouraging students to talk, showing the students respect. The nurse had a concern about confidentiality. Students often share information with her that, as a mandated reporter, she must take to her supervisor. Other behaviors interpreted as caring were checking on the at-risk student, being available, listening, being concerned, following-up, and being non-judgmental. Simple greetings such as talking to the at-risk students and saying hello and good-bye were considered important. The final caring domain identified by adults had to do with contact outside the school day, such as academic assistance after school, attending and chaperoning extracurricular functions, contacting their homes, telephoning parents, and teachers attending parents' night at the community center.

One member of the professional staff mentioned the way in which words are used with the at-risk students:

> * There is a need to be soft-spoken, and to express interest in helping kids. Those that are caring have a certain aura about them and the kids know who they are. Teachers who don't use put-downs. They exemplify caring.

The exhibiting of non-caring behaviors was identified as harsh and clearly observable:

> * Avoidance behavior. They turn their backs and say: NOT MY JOB!
>
> * They trash the kids, ignore them.
>
> * Being very intolerant, overly strict, harsh, belittling.

A professional staff member indicated that the disengagement starts early:

> * They push them(the at-risk students) out of the class, have them pulled out, they don't take attendance, no follow-through, they let them go to the bathroom and disappear for the period.

Some adults spoke of students being mocked or set up by the teachers. The students reinforced this for us the first day we were at the school. The at-risk students were brought to the library by the guards and told the reason they were there. As they walked into the library, several students were heard to mumble: "This is a set-up!" Staff members illustrated their colleagues' negative behavior in the following manner:

> * A lot of put-down behavior, teasing the students. They make fun of them, mimic their accents, especially Black students. The coaches make fun of their appearance (Black students). The teachers don't believe them, listen to them, they bully and boss them around.
>
> * Inappropriate comments by teachers in the classroom. Expectations that are inappropriate based on home life. Teachers keep asking why drugs, why alcohol, etc. A lot of non-caring, lack of communication on the part of the staff. There is little done, things have changed, the community has changed.
>
> * There are set ways of testing kids, they (teachers) do not offer alternatives, instead they take a SCREW YOU attitude, their behavior toward the students says: GOTCHA! If the student is late, there is no dignity allotted the student. They embarrass them, don't call on them, are cynical to them.

When asked to describe a time when an at-risk student came to them with a question or concern, staff responses included:

> * Everyday. Yesterday a student with an eating disorder came in for lotion or something other than "I need help". However, she was really in here for that. Or, when a student comes and says, "I have nothing to do", it's a red flag to me. The other ways they express themselves are "my friend so-and-so is in trouble, thinking about suicide". The issues are often child abuse, or the father walked out

on the family and the kid is feeling shaky, so they feign an illness. I take them to a private room and ask, "What's up, how is home?" I question a lot, but I don't push. I invite kids to eat lunch with me. During their physicals I take a history, I use it as a talk and reflection time. They need to be with their peers if they are having trouble at home. Home is horrible. If you want to see the at-risk kids in action, be here on Friday afternoon. The teachers run out; the kids don't run out, t they live and breathe for each other. The kids who run out are the drug addicts and the school phobics. When kids cut, they cut with their friends. The kids who live in the Projects...their whole life is here. I drive a kid home or make a house visit with the social worker, even then kids are milling around outside, good weather or bad. I keep personal care products here because they don't have them at home.

* Yesterday, an at-risk male was thrown out of the group. He came in to me yelling in a loud, offensive way that he was being discriminated against. I had him write a letter to Mr. Illusori (fictitious name), the principal. I only suspend students for weapons , drugs, and physical fighting. Not for cursing, cutting, no punishment for punishment (I will not suspend if the child has an I.E.P.) .

* I see many every day. The latest was a student who needed to be in rehab. He was referred by the teacher and guidance counselor because probation was involved. I talked to him about outpatient, called places, set up appointments. The student didn't keep the appointment. A few more appointments were made but weren't kept. Finally he was placed at a residential setting. There was lag time while waiting for a bed. I made sure there was a bilingual staff, and that they would cooperate with the family. I saw him every day prior to admitting, for support and encouragement.

It should be noted that the school has an on-going 10-12 member, at-risk committee that meets once a month to address the needs of 950 students. It is composed of guidance counselors, school social workers, the school psychologist, the assistant principal, and, at times, the principal. The agenda can be, according to the staff, at-risk students, the development of new programs, conflict resolution, recommendations for the Committee on Special Education, or anything any committee member wants to discuss. There is neither parent nor student representation on this committee.

Adults have much advice and many ideas about coping strategies for families whose children are having difficulty in school, and again they are parallel to the ones suggested by the at-risk students:

* Keep in contact with the teachers. Call and come in even if the high school feels like you shouldn't be there. Find out what's going on from the teachers and guidance counselors. Structure your child, talk to other parents, find a program that involves them. Meet with the guidance counselor so everyone is clear. Sign homework assignments; it gives parents a sense of control. Attend P.T.A. meetings. The same parents attend every time. Encourage parents to get involved so that at-risk kids are not clumped together with the Special Education students. Special Ed kids have a strong family support network; at-risk kids don't.

* Change your life style. Put kids first. Don't avoid, seek help, resources, family therapy; it's an at-risk family, not an at-risk kid. Be consistent, follow-up.

* Try not to deny what is going on. Reach out for help to anybody. Tell the kid you love him, care even if you don't know how to help. Don't feel guilty or defensive. Remain the adult with kindness and love. Don't fall into the trap of a fight with words. Go with your feelings, your sense of right and wrong.

* Keep working with it in family treatment. Look at your own issues. Listen to teens as well as supply limits and structure. Find a network, support group, try to stay on top of things. Realize we have a loss of control in many ways regarding their decisions and actions.

Culture. According to the adults, the areas in need of change are: reduce class size, have more control over the kids, no milling, less hanging out in the halls, and enough clubs that represent the kids. They also concurred that the at-risk kids need and respond to structure and that they have too much free time in the school's game room. The students are seen as coming to school to socialize. Improved communication, the blurring of roles whereby teachers would not be free to say, "I just teach math," and converting to a house system to make the school seem smaller were seen as ways to improve the culture of the school

One professional staff person, Dr. Angelou (fictitious name), in a facetious comment that had a kernel of truth, said, "Bomb the Projects and the A&P. Distribute equity, eliminate non-caring professionals, sorting, tracking". Her agenda touched on Stone's (1988) definition of equity as treating likes alike. Stone stated that distributions are at the heart of public policy controversies. It is important to keep in mind that equity is the goal for all sides in a distributive conflict; the conflict comes about over how the sides envision the distribution of whatever is the issue. In any distribution, there are three dimensions: the recipients (who gets something?), the item (what is being distributed?), and the process (how is the distribution to be decided upon and carried out?).

Other suggestions were to eliminate half of the faculty through a retirement incentive: "Their classroom maps do not match the new world". It was mentioned that this would literally wipe out four departments and create the ability to hire teachers who were dynamic and interesting, flexible, and who could show concern for individual kids and vary educational experiences for the students. Those adults who expressed these ideas went on to say that if they could attain these goals it would be a great school.

Not everyone saw the situation the same way:

* All the kids have problems using drugs,drinking, being suicidal. The school is not ready to address these issues. The social worker has too big a case load. We

need a lot of everything. The teachers are not here to cater to the emotional needs of the students. They are professionals who are here to teach. They might take an interest or liking to a particular student, but that is not the main reason they are here. If students do not adhere, they push them out.

To make the school a better place for at-risk students, adults responded:

- Have at-risk students go to group sessions as part of their schedule.

- Help students develop short term goals, have blocks of time for classes instead of nine periods.

A blueprint for teachers was also touched upon: more teachers reaching out, teachers being more focused and direct, and being coaches to the students. All the adults believed there was a need for smaller classes. Some said teachers were not explicit in their expectations and felt they needed to make learning fun, interesting, and more diverse. An example was given:

- Have more alternative types of class situations. We have a lot of courses but not for at-risk kids, not enough for the middle range kids. We have specials for Special Education and high honors. Expand the skill courses. Have a wood shop on campus. A deck was built last Spring and lots of the at-risk kids helped. There was a product. They could learn from it. There was structure.

One person commented:

- Look at the home instead of putting all the problems on the school. The school can't do everything. We do not take on the parental role, the kids still need the family more than the school. We are not their parents.

Student success was defined as many things:

- A child comes out of school with something, a product they can use. Not just academics, that is so vague.

- Working to potential and feeling good about themselves. Able to set realistic goals, challenges, find ways of coping.

- Be able to solve word problems, discriminate, argue, draw on knowledge from a global perspective. A fairly good GPA but that is not primary.

- How much they like themselves, have legitimate skills.

There is little discrepancy between who adults and at-risk students regard as adolescent role models. The adults reported them as older siblings, friends, rock stars, and a few athletes. Some said the students did not have any heroes.

When asked the serendipitous question regarding what they would like to add or what they suggest we should be asking adults replied:

- What keeps the boundaries so tight...teacher-student, student-student?
- Why is school still all lecture and no interaction? Teachers are still in front of the room.
- Hire teachers who are more sensitive to the needs of kids.
- Get all the kids to understand each other. That is what it is all about.

Mann (1986) stated that "the clock that measures our efforts is calibrated with the lives of young people" (p.73), a point that is illustrated by a professional staff person:

- Many times we are not as forthright in talking to parents about what goes on-politically, administratively, sexual promiscuity, drinking, drugging. There is a magnitude of problems. We get various signals. The question is at what point do you tell and who tells? They say early interventionis best. Wouldn't it be interesting if getting more involved, parent and teacher, were mandated?

A particular group of professionals, in part, maintained the posture that they (the at-risk students) should do something for us (the professionals) to make us want to be with them, as opposed to we are the professional adults here to help the at-risk kids:

- Don't blame, don't point a finger, no one is responsible, everyone is. Things have changed, everyone should realize it takes a whole village to raise one child. Everyone should be on the same page. What more do you want from us? We need more creative courses. The Board of Education and Central Administration must be involved and have a sense of responsibility. When the students are in the hall, they should be more civilized instead of yelling, pushing, cursing. This is not very positive for adults to see, plus their attitude is awful.

Summary of Findings

Parents and staff believed that each student found someone in the school to care for them, a niche. The security guards were seen by the adults to be an important reserve of caring for the at-risk students. The adults identified the isolates in the at-risk population to be the alcoholics and the drug addicts. Adults and students described the same verbal and non-verbal non-caring behaviors. Adults had definite ideas of how their colleagues could better serve the at-risk students, and these too, matched student responses.

Conclusions

The background features of the students have become the focus of the problem, and, as a result, the correlation has become a causation through improper interpretation (Wehlage, 1989). Staff and parents do not see that they have assigned greater importance to the role the security guards play than the role of the teacher. At this high school, there is a dysfunctional role reversal. Much responsibility, bonding with students, social relations, and problem-solving assistance has been abdicated to the guards. Teachers just teach a subject, and parents are not empowered or encouraged to be an integral part of the school. The principal has left the discussion of helping at-risk students as an intellectual/humanistic argument. Sharp boundaries are drawn between the school and the community, yet staff and administration give lip service to parents being involved in the school. They have not connected the definition of cultural emancipation to life in the neighborhood.

Recommendations

Sirotnik (1990) state that, "as individuals, we cannot help but be in relationship with each other whether we like it or not" (p. 301). He went on to say: "Caring refers to a deep relationship between people based on mutuality, respect, relatedness, receptivity, and trust" (p. 302). When Sirotnik asked students what the most important characteristic of a good teacher was, "their first response will be something like 'a good teacher cares about you, respects you as a person, is someone you can trust'" (p.301). Goodlad (1984) saw the nurturing necessary to be an effective disciplinarian, counselor, advisor, and mentor as:

> residue from the once implicit assumption that the school should be during its hours of responsibility what good homes are expected to be the rest of the time...or at least permitted to do more of what home and church once did together in the spiritual realm. (p.70)

Engaging the at-risk student must be a collaborative effort, for, according to Goodman(1995) :

> For all the reams of research and the endless social jargon, the current troubled state of children in America can be summed up pretty much in one sentence: There aren't enough caring adults in their lives. Most of the adults that children now see live inside a television set. (p.79)

A Culture of Caring

School cultures reflect belief systems. The leaders of the school must change the community to change the school. The neighborhood, the school, and the community (society or environment) are the three parts of the equation.

- Move away from standardization and central planning to community building. The community that houses the school must have people look at the problems differently, understanding that people have different competencies. Teams should be allowed to develop the school. The community needs a new image. To do this, efforts must be made to rebuild the community.

- Teachers are the experts, and parents are the visitors. If the school is to be a constructivist school, it needs parents as active participants. The role of the teacher must be to recognize the professional competencies and expertise of the parents and use them in the classroom.

- All the dollars used for guards, aides, and paraprofessionals should be used to hire more teachers, better and more creative teachers, and to lower student-teacher ratios.

A recommendation that addresses the caring, culture and curriculum is :

- Common design principles could help the school become a collection of centers of interest instead of nine periods a day with no interconnectedness. These centers of interest would create multiple thought units that have coherence, collaboration, and utilize diversity and teacher competencies.

Curriculum

When asked about the symbolism of his Obi-Wan Kenobi character in the "Star Wars" movies, the film director George Lucas made the statement that teachers have a more profound impact than heroes.

- Most importantly a curriculum revision to study cultural groups previously omitted from history courses must occur.

* Just changing the lessons (curricular reform) will not change the learning styles. The solution is to build social cooperation and interdependencies. According to Riley (in Winik, 1995), we must create a culture of learning, "where learning is fun, exciting and challenging. You can continue learning at the dinner table, Sunday school, watching the evening news. Learning should be throughout life" (p.8)

* There must be a redefinition of the work students do and how the students work. Curriculum has to be more than democratic; it has to be activist. The students must be given every opportunity to practice special kinds of knowledge such as intuition, judgment, and insight. Knowledge must be related to the reality of the students' experience (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993). We end up stopping at the abstractions and do not make the connections to work and knowing. Too often, this is where professional competence falls shore (Mann, 1992). There must be a connection; the educators must reverse the process, talk about the experiences, and then attach the words and goals to the experience.

* Everyone should come to the table on an equal footing. Parents and experts have much to contribute. Boger (1989) asserted that "to be meaningful, enduring and effective, parent involvement has to be fully integrated into the structure and process of learning in school and not be treated as an adjunct project" (p.4). Prior to creating a design for engaging at-risk students, parents must be trained to be put on an equal footing with the experts. To do this, the school must train parents to participate effectively, giving them expertise. The design should have four features: (1) instruction, (2) organization, (3)governance, and (4) accountability. Parents must be capable of talking about these four elements. People must be given a holistic sense of what they are doing. Designs cannot be talked about in the abstract. If you want people to participate on an equal footing, they need to be shown what some of the options are and what the planning process is. Parents must be educated about the models and helped to develop an understanding of how processes or systems function within these different models. The goal of the school leadership should be to create competence for the people in the neighborhood.

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